

Army sets mid-March timeline for Guard payments

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By James Lynch

Iowa National Guard members owed benefits from a tour of Iraq that ended more than two-and-a-half years ago should receive checks by mid-March, the Army said Wednesday.

The announcement, which came on the heels of word Tuesday the Army would establish a timeline for paying respite leave benefits to 22,000 Guard members nationwide, including about 800 in Iowa, made clear to 1st District Rep. Bruce Braley the Army is "very aware of the intense congressional interest in getting this done."

"If you look at the instructions, it's clear the message has been heard that there could be a price to pay in congressional oversight if this doesn't get done and doesn't get done correctly," Braley said while traveling in Iowa Wednesday.

Iowa congressmen have been expressing their frustration with the delay in payment of the benefits that were earned more than two-and-a-half years ago.

“This situation has been frustrating and I am pleased to finally see action,” 2nd District Rep. Dave Loebsack said Wednesday after the Army announced the majority of soldiers still in service will be paid March 15-19. The majority of those who have left the service will receive a check issued during the same period.

“Finally. This is great news,” said Sen. Chuck Grassley. “When we first started on this nearly two years ago, I don’t think any of us believed it would be such a bureaucratic nightmare to get these men and women the benefits they are entitled to.”

Braley, who first started hearing about the delay shortly after he was sworn in 2007, echoed those frustrations. At times, he said, it seemed Department of Defense personnel appeared to believe if they moved slowly the issues would go away.

At issue is up to \$200 a day in Post-Deployment/Mobilization Respite Absence (PDMRA) program, commonly known as “respite leave.” It was promised by the Department of Defense for those soldiers to soldiers who served beyond their scheduled deployments. Department protocols call for Guard members to serve no more than one year in five. The idea was to provide service members who were deployed beyond established rotation cycles additional time to reintegrate into civilian life, as well as to help with retention of service members who had experienced long tours.

In Iowa, most of the Guardsmen owed respite leave belong to the 1-133rd Infantry. It was deployed for 22 months, including approximately 16 month in Iraq ending in July 2007. It includes units in Waterloo, Dubuque, Oelwein, Iowa Falls and Charles City.

Many of them have been deployed again and that fueled the frustration congressmen felt, Braley said.

“After it became clear we couldn’t cajole the department into fulfilling this commitment, we passed a requirement that it pay the benefits in the Defense Authorization Act,” Braley said. “Still, it appeared there was no interest in resolving the issue.

“It was only after a number of us started to up the level of pressure and to have conversations with the White House about how bad this would look to redeploy these soldiers without paying them what they have been owed that we started to get action,” he said.

Loebsack, for example, raised the issue with Secretary Robert Gates at a House Armed Services Committee hearing. He plans to raise it again Feb. 25 when Secretary of the Army John McHugh and Gen. George Casey appear before the committee.

Grassley also promised to keep "a close eye on these payments to make sure the Guard keeps as close to this timeline as possible."